Like the other Royal Parks in London, Hyde Park owes its existence to Henry VIII, who acquired vast tracts of land in the 1530s to satisfy his love of the chase. The King wanted to create a hunting ground that stretched from his palace at Whitehall to the slopes of Hampstead. Present-day St James’s Park, Regent’s Park and Hyde Park are the result. These particular acres were once farmed by the monks of Westminster and included a series of fishponds along the Westbourne river.

The parks were enclosed, stocked and kept strictly private. In a proclamation of 1536 Henry stated: ‘As the King’s most royal Majesty is desirous to have the games of hare, partridge, pheasant and heron preserved, in and about the honour of his palace of Westminster, for his own disport and pastime, no person, on the pain of imprisonment of their bodies, and further punishment at his Majesty’s will and pleasure, is to presume to hunt or hawk, from the palace of Westminster … to Hampstead Heath.’

Hunting, as well as providing fresh meat, was seen as the sport of kings and a form of corporate entertainment. In 1592 Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Anjou, one of her many unsuccessful suitors, watched the hunt from stands in Hyde Park.

Over the centuries the royal prerogative was whittled away until, in the 19th century, the parks became the popular recreation grounds we know today. In Hyde Park the process began in 1630 when Charles I opened it to the public and laid out the Ring, a carriageway or racecourse north of the present Serpentine boathouses. Under Charles II the park, walled and restocked, became a fashionable venue and the beau
monde, even the King himself, could be seen there daily, circling the Ring in their splendid carriages or showing off their latest finery. The diarist Samuel Pepys, ever conscious of his social position, wrote in 1668: ‘Took up my wife and Deb, and to the Park, where being in a hackney (hired coach) and they undressed, was ashamed to go into the Tour, but went around the Park, and so with pleasure home.’

By the 1730s, however, the smart set had tired of the Ring and the park, despite the occasional highwayman, had become a popular public resort. Among its attractions were riding, swimming, duelling and, most thrilling of all, executions. This gruesome entertainment came to an end in 1783, when the last public hanging took place at Tyburn, on the north side of the park. By the early 19th century the park was in a deplorable state and in 1823 the Commissioners of Woods and Forests took matters in hand with a programme of improvements. Policing, along with regular closing hours, was introduced and the architect Decimus Burton, aged only 25, was appointed to deal with the structure of the park. By putting up new railings and building gates and lodges in a neo-classical style, he gave it dignity and a unified character.

The Hyde Park section of the walk is best entered from Hyde Park Corner, through Apsley Gate, the elegant Greek Revival screen of 1825 that was the culmination of Burton’s work for the park. It combines an Ionic colonnade with a frieze copied directly from the Parthenon sculpture. At this period Burton was also designing a new western approach to Buckingham Palace, the gate of which formed the beginning of a route that would run through his own Constitution Arch – which then stood in line with the screen – to end at John Nash’s Marble Arch in the forecourt of the palace. Along with Apsley House and St George’s Hospital (now the Lanesborough Hotel), the gate and arch made a very fine group of neo-classical monuments at one of the main entrances to London. Now, unfortunately, its significance is lost in the maze and roar of traffic.

Apsley House, whose postal address is simply Number 1, London, was the home of the Duke of Wellington. One of the final honours enjoyed by the Duke was to be Ranger of the Metropolitan Royal Parks. The house, built by Robert Adam in 1771–8, was enlarged in the 1820s and faced in yellow Bath stone. Inside is a vast, nude statue of Napoleon by Canova, while outside, to the north, is an even larger one of Wellington himself by Richard Westmacott. Erected in 1822 it was the park’s first statue, and its most controversial. Loosely described as Achilles, the huge figure was cast in bronze obtained from cannon captured in Wellington’s campaigns. The image was taken from a Roman group on Monte Cavallo but the head was clearly modelled on the Duke himself. This was a problem, for a statue that was also nude. The Ladies of England, who had commissioned it, were horrified but the press was delighted. The offensive member, however, was soon covered by a small fig leaf.
Beside the Achilles statue are the Queen Elizabeth Gates, another controversial addition to the park. They were installed in 1993 in honour of the Queen Mother. The central screen, by David Wynne, unites the lion of England and the unicorn of Scotland. The gates themselves are in stainless steel patinated with natural oxides. Their sculptor, Giuseppe Lund, designed them to be ‘feminine and fresh with the charm of an English garden’, in deliberate contrast to the formal, masculine character of their setting, but they attracted much public criticism. The former Arts Minister Lord St John of Fawley sprang to their defence, saying: ‘The gates are full of joy, strength and courage like the great personage in whose honour they have been created. … Mr Lund is greatly to be congratulated on his imagination, creative powers and the sheer technical control of his material. He deserves and will gain the nation’s gratitude.’

From here the route goes north, along the Broad Walk magnificently flanked by rows of plane trees. On the left, just in front of the private gate into the shrubbery, is an unusual tree, Cladrastis lutea, also known as Kentucky yellow wood since its timber turns yellow. Further up the Broad Walk on the right is the Four Winds fountain sometimes known as the Joy of Life fountain. Dating from 1963, when Park Lane was widened, its gravity-defying bronze figures were sculpted by T. B. Huxley-Jones. In Victorian times there was a much admired sunken garden here, on the site of an old reservoir that once provided the royal palaces with water. Behind the fountain can be seen the imposing towers of the Dorchester Hotel, the headquarters of General Eisenhower in World War II.

Turning left after the fountain, towards a small building flanked by trees, the route crosses the Parade Ground. It has served as an English champ de Mars for 400 years, since the days when Queen Elizabeth held the first military reviews in the park. Gun salutes are still fired here on royal anniversaries. The building is a rather stylish, porticoed public lavatory, one of the many built in the 1900s. Beside it is a drinking fountain by Theo Crosby for the 1981 Year of the Child, when 180,000 children attended the Great Children’s Party. It was erected as a tribute to the park staff, who surely deserved it. Behind is the Lookout Environment Centre, which offers children the opportunity to study animal and plant life in the park. There are plans to turn the adjoining reservoir area, on the site of the long-vanished Ring, into special habitat.

To the north is the site of the Reformers’ Tree, marked by a circular mosaic pavement. In the mid-19th century there were frequent, and sometimes violent, public demonstrations in the park attracting vast crowds. In 1866, when the Commissioner of the Police refused the Reform League permission to hold another mass rally, enraged protesters tore down the iron railings, swarmed in and burnt down a venerable tree. The subsequent rioting and bloodshed persuaded the authorities that a stick-and-carrot approach was called for. The police presence was increased, but Speakers’ Corner was sanctioned in 1871 as a public meeting place. Close to Marble Arch, at the other side of the Parade Ground, it is still a powerful symbol of the British right to free speech. Hyde Park continues to attract protestors, and more than 100,000 members of the Countryside Alliance gathered here without incident in 1997.

The Old Police House, to the west on the left of the route, was built in 1900–02 on the site of the Magazine Barracks. A fine Queen Anne revival building, it is the headquarters of the Royal Parks Agency and the Royal Parks Constabulary, which are now responsible for keeping order in the park. The path then follows the line of...
Small Copper butterfly

Rima

The Hudson Memorial

the shrubbery to the Hudson Memorial, passing the Chinese evergreen magnolia (Magnolia delavayi), a small tree with huge leaves that are among the largest found outdoors in the British Isles. In late summer it has wonderfully scented, parchment-coloured flowers.

The memorial to the writer and naturalist W. H. Hudson is tucked into the bird sanctuary to the south of the nursery area. Hudson grew up on a ranch in Argentina but spent most of his life in London, often in great poverty. He was probably the first person to appreciate that the growth of London was having an adverse effect on its bird life. In his

Birds of London of 1898 he attacked the Parks authorities for their 'improving spirit which makes for prettiness' but provided no shelter for wildlife. He called for parks where trees were 'not deprived of their lower branches, nor otherwise mutilated, or cut down because they were aged or draped in ivy', nor were the 'wind-chased yellow and russet leaves that give a characteristic beauty (to be) ... removed like offensive objects', nor 'the native shrubs and evergreens ... to be replaced by that always inharmonious exotic, the rhododendron'. A sanctuary, he said, could be made in any park with 'a small pond, with or without islets, with sedge, rushes, and a few shrubs or willows on its margins for cover, the whole protected from dogs and people by a light iron fence'.

At the time Hudson was dismissed as a charlatan, but his views eventually won respect and the authorities are now very keen to encourage wildlife. Although most of the park is taken up by open grassland and widely spaced trees which provide little natural cover, an area to the north is now treated as meadow and only mown once a year, in the late summer. The cuttings are left on the ground for a short while, and as a result the range of grasses and flora has increased. Grasshoppers and small moths have more difficult to lure mammals back into the park, a fox is said to inhabit the Hyde Park corner shrubbery and two species of bat, the pipistrelle and the noctule, feed by the Serpentine, though their roosts have not been found. Hedgehogs are also occasionally seen.

The memorial itself is not an unqualified success, as the stone sides of the pool are too steep to allow birds to drink or bathe. Like other monuments in the parks, it also attracted the wrath of the public when it was unveiled by the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, in 1925. It was the relief carving by Jacob Epstein, showing Kuma, the spirit of the forest in Hudson's celebrated book Green Mansions, that caused such offence. 'Take this horror out of the park!' shrieked the Daily Mail. 'It would be a reproach to all concerned if future generations were allowed to imagine that this piece of artistic anarchy in any way reflects the spirit of the age,' intoned various dignitaries. A journalist wrote caustically, 'The large eagle-like bird in the sculpture must be a portrait statue of old Hudson himself. When I used to ... lunch with him at Whiteley's, it was like taking one of the hunched eagles at the zoo out of his cage for an airing.' Fortunately, good sense prevailed in the end. George Bernard Shaw, Sybil Thorndike and Augustus John lent their names to a letter in The Times; the artist Muirhead Bone argued their case with the Commissioner of Works; and the memorial stayed. It is now considered one of Epstein's finest early works.

Beyond the Hudson Memorial is the West Carriage Drive, which marks the boundary with Kensington Gardens. Turning left, the Serpentine Bridge is reached. At this point there is a choice of either following the route around Kensington Gardens, which is described on pages 53–55, or completing the Hyde Park loop by walking along the south bank of the Serpentine.

The bridge is a convenient place to pause and look at the Long Water, winding up through Kensington Gardens, and the Serpentine, stretching down towards Hyde Park Corner. In the distance can be seen the Palace of Westminster. Once this was the focal point of a landscape that seemed entirely natural, but the view is now marred by the high-rise buildings that dominate the skyline.

This vista is the result of the first – and only – major landscaping in the park. It took place in the 1730s when Queen Caroline, the dynamic German wife of George II, oversaw the development of Kensington Gardens and used the existing string of fishponds to create the Serpentine and the Long Water. It is said that she had grandiose plans to build a new palace and turn virtually the whole of Hyde Park into a private demesne but Walpole, the Prime Minister, squashed her proposals by saying it would cost her merely 'three crowns'. The Hanoverian dynasty that had recently succeeded to the crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland could not afford to alienate its subjects.

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Queen Caroline’s great-grandson, the hopelessly extravagant Prince Regent, decided in 1814 to woo the public with a vast fair in premature celebration of Napoleon’s defeat. In climax was a mock naval battle on the Serpentine in which the miniature French fleet was set alight. This event, as well as costing the Government the outrageous sum of £40,000, caused considerable damage to the park and gave rise to the 1823 programme of improvements. Alongside the work undertaken by Decimus Burton, the circulation was improved by John Loudon McAdam, the inventor of the ‘macadam’ road surface. He made new rides and built the Serpentine Bridge, to an elegant design by George and John Rennie, to link the new, smart residential areas of Bayswater to the north and Knightsbridge to the south. Previously a small cascade had marked the junction between the two lakes; the bridge created a thoroughfare that quite changed the character of the park.

After crossing the bridge, the route leads to the Lido Pavilion, built in 1930 to provide the mixed bathing and sunbathing facilities demanded by the Sunlight League. Lord Lansbury, the First Commissioner of Works, was keen to improve recreational facilities during the Depression years and had appealed for funds. The pavilion was built with the help of £5,000 donated by a Mr D’Arcy Cooper in memory of his son, whose death in World War I is commemorated by a plaque by the entrance. Beyond it is Beach Head, with its diving platform and swimming area. Members of the Serpentine Swimming Club have swum here daily, winter and summer, since 1864. Boating is also popular and the Royal Thames Yacht Club’s annual regatta takes place in February.

The shore on the far side of the Serpentine is popular for roller-blading. There are two boathouses, the one to the right erected in 1903, near the former Receiving House that belonged to the Royal Humane Society. This institution was founded in 1774 to provide a rescue service for the Serpentine, which has always been a magnet for drunks, revellers and suicides. On a dark December day in 1816 Harriet Shelley, the estranged wife of the poet, drowned herself in the Long Water.

Away to the right the Knightsbridge Barracks can be seen. An unfortunate example of Brutalism in architecture, the barracks were built in 1967–9 by Sir Basil Spence for the Household Cavalry. With their tall bearskins, jangling spurs and shining boots, the men are a magnificent sight as they leave the yard under the watchful eye of the police. The troupes of children in yellow jumpers and brown breeches that congregate under the trees come from nearby Hill House School, which Prince Charles briefly attended as a small boy.

At the end of the Serpentine the route turns left over a bridge, passing an elegant urn in memory of Queen Caroline. The canopied Dell Restaurant at the end was designed by Patrick Gwynne in 1965 and is one of the few modern buildings in the Royal Parks of true architectural merit. There is a long tradition of refreshment here. In 1668 Samuel Pepys, after another minor embarrassment, resorted to the Lodge to drink ‘a cup of new milk’ before returning home. In the 19th century, however, the provision of food became a contentious issue. In 1883 the deeply conservative Duke of Cambridge, who had succeeded the Duke of Wellington as Ranger, wrote: ‘I have … set my face against the erection of any places for Refreshment in the Royal Parks, as I consider that these Parks are for the enjoyment of fresh air, and are not to be turned into Tea Gardens.’ He was gently overruled.

Opposite the entrance to the restaurant is the Abbey Spring Monument (1868), an urn marking the ancient spring that supplied water to Westminster Abbey. The right to use this water, granted by Edward the Confessor, was jealously guarded until the conduit was cut off by the Metropolitan Railway in 1861. Here the route goes right and then left, towards the Rose Garden. The area below the bridge is known as the Dell and contains a megalith. This incongruous assembly is all that remains of the 1861 drinking fountain that was constructed from stones quarried at Liskeard in Cornwall.

The Dell has been planted with shrubs and exotic trees very different from the parkland species – lime, plane, oak and horse chestnut – that predominate elsewhere in the park. They include the Caucasian wingnut (Pterocarya fraxinifolia), which has striking flowers in the summer in the form of long yellow-green tassels, a vigorously growing dawn redwood (Metasequoia glyptostroboides), a magnificent
weeping beech (Fagus sylvatica ‘Pendula’) and a Magnolia × soulangiana. Throughout this area there are also choice birch trees, including the white-stemmed Himalayan birch (Betula utilis) and the striking red-barked birch (B. albosinensis f. septentrionalis). Many of these are grouped around the Holocaust Memorial, a dignified tribute to the right of the path that leads to the Rose Garden. A little further along to the left can be seen another interesting tree, the Caucasian elm (Zelkova carpinifolia), with its brush-shaped crown and muscular trunk.

In the Rose Garden there is a statue by Countess Feodora Gleichen of Diana (1906), drawing her bow along the tunnel of pleached lime, and a Boy and Dolphin by Alexander Munro (1862). This was once the centrepiece of the Victorian sunken garden that was demolished to make way for Park Lane.

To the right is Rotten Row, which was created by William III to link Whitehall with his new palace at Kensington. Illuminated by 300 lanterns to discourage footpads, it was the first road in England to be lit in the hours of darkness and was called the route du roi, a name that was corrupted over the years to Rotten Row. The road soon became as fashionable as the Ring had once been, though other than the Hereditary Grand Falconer, only royalty was allowed to drive there. It remained a very smart place to ride, so much so that in 1908 Edward VII issued a letter to the effect that ‘ladies who ride astride in the Park will not be allowed to come to court’. A century later sartorial, and equestrian, standards have declined, but on a lucky day one can still see the Queen’s immaculate carriages taking the air.